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Command aims at handling scientist, engineer shortage

by Tech. Sgt. Carl Norman, AFMC Public Affairs

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE, Ohio — A three-pronged approach is how Air Force Materiel Command officials hope to fill 2,700 scientist and engineer vacancies and prepare for up to 70 percent of its civilians currently in those jobs to retire soon.

As part of AFMC's Year of the Engineer and Scientist initiative to focus Air Force people's attention at all levels on the problem, command officials are aiming at three main scientist and engineer recruiting areas: work-force training and development; work-force size and mix; and motivation, according to James Papa, AFMC engineering and technical management director.

"It's through the scientist and engineer corps that we sustain what's very important — technological dominance on the battlefield," Papa said. "It goes beyond just producing state-of-the-art systems, we need to have a robust scientist and engineer corps to be on the leading edge and stay ahead of our adversaries."

Papa said if the shortage goes unchecked, it could pose a readiness issue of sorts for America's war fighters.

"With current vacancies and a large number of retirements in the next half decade potentially deteriorating the weapons acquisition and oversight process, we're not at the point we'd like to be and that could ripple out to the field."

Speaking of the three-pronged approach, Papa said work-force training and development looks at what kinds of experience scientists and engineers should have in their career, what kind of training they should have and when they should have it, along with what kind of career paths and promotion potential they should have.

"And if there are any obstacles to scientists and engineers advancing in those career paths, we need to find ways to solve those," he said.

AFMC initiatives to attack those obstacles include increased educational opportunities and improvements in career development for military engineering officers, making sure there's consistency in what's expected of them in terms of spending time getting education and training and still being competitive for promotion, he said.

The motivation area deals with making sure scientists and engineers are recognized for their accomplishments and provided fair compensation, Papa said.

"We've looked at market comparison and what engineers in industry are receiving in terms of starting salaries and middle salaries, and there's a gap there," he said. "We're trying to work the funding process with the air staff in building initiatives for recruiting and retention bonuses and salary adjustments that would make things more in line with the market we have to compete with for scientists and engineers."

Work force size and mix involves having a good handle on what the command and Air Force requirements are for scientists and engineers.

"We've done some requirements studies to determine that the numbers of slots we have for scientists and engineers is about right for the workload and things we see coming; we're just short on filling those," Papa said. "Our problem is assigning faces to the spaces."

Currently, Papa said AFMC is about 85 percent manned for scientists and engineers on the civilian side. However, military scientist manning is at about 80 percent and dips down around 62 percent for engineers.

"This is a little misleading, given the fact the command has been reducing its manpower for the past 12 years," said Bob DiTommaso, AFMC project engineer. "We anticipate manning will decrease as our manpower levels reach a steady state and people still continue leaving due to retirement and other causes."

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What the future holds for Air Force scientists and engineers is unclear. But Gen. Lester Lyles, AFMC commander, said he's pleased with what his command is doing to work its way through the mire.

"From the perspective of things that we're doing to try and understand the problem and address those things we understand, I feel very pleased," Lyles said. **@**